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## **Taking a Bow Too Seriously: Power and Etiquette in the U.S.-Japanese Relations<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to analyze the media portrayal of the controversy stemming from president Barack Obama's bow to Emperor Akihito during their meeting in Tokyo in November 2009. The resulting controversy was quickly dubbed the "Bow-gate" and played itself out mostly in press commentary columns, blogs and political cable TV talk shows. Events like this offer an excellent opportunity to also see the intercultural dynamics and presuppositions existing between respective countries, as well as domestic political determinants shaping the perception of a presidency. A corpus of print and Internet media was selected examined in order to find and discuss the typical conceptual frames employed when debating the event.

### **Introduction**

This paper will be an attempt to present some observations that can be drawn from the analysis of press and Internet discussions surrounding Barack Obama's bow to the Emperor Akihito during their formal meeting in Tokyo, on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2009. The resulting controversy was quickly dubbed the "Bow-gate" and played itself out mostly in press commentary columns, blogs and political cable TV talk shows. While president's visits and meetings abroad are usually analyzed in the context of foreign policy, events like this offer an excellent opportunity to also see the intercultural dynamics and presuppositions existing between respective countries, as well as domestic political determinants shaping the perception of a presidency.

The paper will be divided in three parts. First, research questions will be posed after a short introduction to the cultural dynamics in the U.S.-Japan relationship as the exemplification of ideological presuppositions of the U.S. foreign policy. Then, the event in question will be recalled more closely and the corpus of texts analyzed as

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based in part on a conference presentation co-authored with Anna Trzaska.

well as methods of analysis will be presented. Finally, conclusions will be formulated and discussed.

The history of the U.S. – Japan relationship offers many fascinating insights about interactions between culturally different states which share, at times at least, ambitions for global prominence. From the symbolic and actual “opening” of Japan, through fierce competition culminating in a brutal war, until the current long-lasting and stable alliance, the history of the relationship offers a broad empirical material that could be used to analyze not only the mutual relations, but also the broader West-East interactions.

## Cultural Background and Research Questions

The foundations for the current relations were laid after World War II, when victorious U.S. become a “sponsor” for Japan’s return to the international community as a model success of the capitalist camp. Racist portrayal of the Japanese during the war or controversies concerning the use of atomic weapons were generally brushed aside by what Igarashi called the “foundational narrative”<sup>2</sup> explaining the common perceptions of the U.S.-Japanese relations. In that narrative, the atomic violence was the necessary shock the U.S. had to inflict on Japan to rescue it from its erroneous ways and help it realize the righteous longing for liberalism and democracy. Wartime images of the Japanese as ruthless and aggressive samurai<sup>3</sup> were replaced by that of friendly and docile geisha,<sup>4</sup> the new face of a country and its attractive traditionalism being integrated with modernization and development.

This can be viewed also as an exemplification, in a sense, of typical orientalist pattern of Western nation civilizing an Asian nation, and was also fitting excellently with traditional American self-perception of champions of democracy and liberty.<sup>5</sup>

A notable upset to this narrative happen in the mid 80s, when Japan began to be perceived, for awhile, as the main challenger of the U.S. global dominance. Strategically, Japan remained America’s “protégé,” continuing the post-war structure of an asymmetrical alliance. However, its amazing economic success was a cause for tension. While the U.S. still had get used to its, now chronic, foreign exchange deficit, Japan became the world’s biggest creditor, had a huge surplus in trade exchange with the U.S. and

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<sup>2</sup> Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of memory: Narratives of war in postwar Japanese culture, 1945–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20–34.

<sup>3</sup> Seminal monograph on this subject is John Dower’s *War without mercy. Race and power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s geisha ally: Reimagining the Japanese enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Igarashi, *Bodies of memory*, 35–28.

began aggressively investing and purchasing on American soil.<sup>6</sup> Economic policy of Japan started to be viewed by many as “predatory” and detrimental to the U.S. world standing. While the security alliance was faring fairly well, the U.S. had to throw its weight on the economic front, pressuring Japan to make some concessions on issues perceived to be unfair to American manufacturers, such as market access and currency manipulation.

The fears of U.S. „passing” and the looming Japanese economic threat were often debated, some popular journalists and economists even advising the U.S. to accept some elements of the Japanese capitalism model, seen as superior. Previously repressed images of Japan as a threat resurfaced often, geisha being overshadowed by a reinvention of samurai – a “sarariman”,<sup>7</sup> rank and file corporate employee, insanely devoted and loyal to his company, which in turn was state-steered into an aggressive strategy of economic competition with the U.S. Main tenets of academically outdated anthropological descriptions of Japanese society, some dating to Ruth Benedict’s wartime studies, were continually used to reinforce the image of the Japanese as groupist, hierarchical, inscrutable.<sup>8</sup> This easily translated into a deep uncertainty about the future: in a 1989 poll more Americans were considering Japan as the greatest threat than there were those pointing to Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

The Japanese economy went into a crisis in mid 90s and since then never truly picked up, and so the “threat” disappeared from the public’s interests. China gradually took over the role of potential challenger to America’s global position. The U.S.-Japanese relations are nowadays rarely considered important news. The “bow-gate” offers an opportunity to examine the current public perceptions of Japan in context of the dynamics sketched above. The symbolic meaning of the meeting of two leaders is especially important, as the postwar relationship of subdued Japan with its benevolent occupier is often exemplified by the famous photograph of general Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito. The general, uniformed, tall and muscular, is posing next to much shorter and subdued Emperor, projecting the aura of decisiveness and strength.

Second important angle from which the controversy can be analyzed is that of public perceptions surrounding Barack Obama’s presidency and foreign policy. The expectations Obama set for his presidency during the campaign were quite clear – new approach was to be based on developing soft or “smart” power and repairing the damage to the U.S. image wrought by the former president. This had to be reconciled with the traditional realist imperatives continually present in American strategy.<sup>10</sup> That

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<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Heale, “Anatomy of a scare: yellow peril politics in America, 1980–1993,” *Journal of American Studies*, 43 (2009): 19–47.

<sup>7</sup> Japanese appropriation of the words “salaried man.”

<sup>8</sup> Steven S. Rosen, “Japan as other: Orientalism and cultural conflict,” *Intercultural Communication* 4 (2000), <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr4/rosen.htm> (accessed August 28, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Susan D. Moeller, “Pictures of the enemy: Fifty years of images of Japan in the American press, 1941–1992,” *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 1 (1996): 37.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Michael Green, David Twining, “Democracy and American grand strategy in Asia: The Realist principles behind an enduring idealism,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & Strate* 30, no. 1 (2008).

was especially pertinent to the Asia policy, where many perceived American position as eroding versus the assertive China.<sup>11</sup> Obama faced a difficult challenge then, as he would be “suspect” to conservative audience as a Democrat, traditionally perceived as weak and deferential. Therefore, the controversy can inform us about the domestic political constraints imposed on the president’s public image.

## Methods

Barack Obama’s 9 day trip to Asia in November 2009, his first while in office, was rather intense, with visits to Japan, China, Korea, and a stopover in Singapore to attend the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Singapore. Expectations were high, as they were everywhere Obama went during the first year of his term, especially that he was the first president of the USA who could claim some kind of Asian heritage. The list of issues with high priority was quite lengthy – negotiating economic, climate and security initiatives with APEC countries, discussing Iran sanctions and economic relations with China, or reaffirming alliances with two long time partners in East Asia – South Korea and Japan. Japan was the first country on the list to visit, and, while certainly not trivial, the issues that were to be discussed were not on top of the list of those to draw most of the international and domestic attention. That spot was of course reserved for the “rising” China.<sup>12</sup> And yet the infamous “Obama bow” managed to become a somewhat of a highlight of the whole trip.

Obama was granted a lunch with the imperial couple, that is the Emperor Akihito and his wife Michiko, at the Imperial Palace. While walking up to greet them, he dived into a rather deep bow while, at the same time, offering his handshake to the, apparently unfazed, emperor.

It was all rather quick, lasting maybe a second. There is no need for special expertise to know how customary bowing is in Japanese culture, as a sign of respect and civility. No exceptional amount of good will is also required to view this, however perhaps unusual, gesture as a sign of good will and an eagerness for politeness on the part of Obama. If some amount of awkwardness was present, it may have happened because of the significant height difference between Obama and Akihito – instinctively not wanting to still be towering the emperor after completing the bow, Obama went lower than it was necessary. But if common sense and practical explanations were the only ones present, there wouldn’t be a sufficient reason for this paper.

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<sup>11</sup> See for example: Jan Yang, Rouben Azizian, “China-US Tensions: New Era or Old Pattern?,” *Zealand International Review* 35, no. 6 (2010): 16.

<sup>12</sup> See for example: Michael D. Swaine, “Perceptions of an assertive China,” *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (2000): 1–19; Li Zhang, “The rise of China: media perception and implications for international politics,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 64, no. 19 (2010): 233–254.

That brief episode was the beginning of what was later to be often referred to as the “Bow-gate.” The picture of Obama bent in front of the imperial couple<sup>13</sup> was picked up immediately by the media and, more importantly, appeared on hundreds of blog posts, naturally mostly on those critical of Obama. After this initial phase the debate about the issue entered a stage of mutually stimulated “buzz,” in which the blogs reacted not only to the event itself but to the media portrayal of thereof, and the media started to follow up the event by relating to what was being said within the blogosphere. *Politico* was at front of the debate, publishing the photo and scoring a widely quoted comment from Obama staffer, who maintained that nothing inappropriate took place and that “I think that those who try to politicize those things are just way, way, way off base (...) He observes protocol (...) he enhanced both the position and the status of the U.S., relative to Japan.”<sup>14</sup> L.A. Times blog titled its feature on the event “How Low Can He Go”, posting updates on major new developments in the debate, such as linking to YouTube montages of other instances of Obama’s bows when meeting foreign leaders.<sup>15</sup> The initiative belonged to conservative media where, unsurprisingly, the gesture was seen as inappropriate, to say the least. Interestingly, Fox News channel even conducted a poll to examine the public reception of the controversy, which was probably closest anyone has gotten to relate the debate to actual public sentiment. The results were not good for the conservatives, since only 28 percent answered that the gesture was inappropriate.<sup>16</sup>

The corpus of texts selected to explore the research questions outlined above consisted of traditional press articles as well as political blogs, dating from November 14<sup>th</sup> 2009 onward. Ten newspapers and magazines were selected based on largest daily circulation in 2009.<sup>17</sup> Blogs were selected by cross referencing the two widely recognized blog ranking systems of Technocrati and Wikio websites<sup>18</sup> – blogs appearing in respective rankings top tens were taken under consideration. The search was performed online<sup>19</sup> and at the EBSCO’s Newspaper Source database,<sup>20</sup> using appropriate keywords (such as “bow”, “Akihito”, etc.). Appendix contains the list of the 34 sources used.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/17/obama-bowing-japanese-emperor> (accessed February 10, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Mike Allen, “Barack Obama bowed to Japanese emperor as ‘protocol.’” *Politico*. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1109/2961.htm> (accessed February 10, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Malcolm, “How low will he go? Obama gives Japan’s Emperor Akihito a wow bow.” *Top of the Hat*, <http://www.latimesblogs.latimes.com/Washington/2009/11obama-emperor-akihito-japan.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Clarence Page, “President’s sense of timing lacks drama.” *Chicago Tribune* 29 (accessed November 2009: 1.39)

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.burresluc.com/top100/2009\\_Top\\_100List.pdf](http://www.burresluc.com/top100/2009_Top_100List.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/top-us-politics-blogs-technoratis-update>; <http://Americanpowerblog.blogspot.com/2009/06/bloggers-whos-who-wikios-top-100.html> (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Using Google as well as particular blogs’ own search functionality.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ebscohost.com/academic/newspaper-source> (accessed February 10, 2011)

The electronic medium of blogs was chosen since the debate was, in significant degree, stimulated by the political blogs circuit, with the typical constant recycling of news by adding updates, back-and-forth arguments being carried on sometimes hourly basis or referencing and quoting other blogs or news outlets. The significance of blogs in American political debates has been widely noted in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

Content analysis and discourse analysis establish the methodological background for examining of the corpus. From the host of analytical tools used in those methods, for purposes of this paper the conceptual frame analysis was employed. The concept of a frame, originally introduced by Erving Goffman and since then much transformed, is an attempt to define an ontological structure of reality explicitly or implicitly introduced by text producers.<sup>22</sup> Luther and Miller defined constructing frames as “simplifying, highlighting and making more salient some aspects of reality while obscuring other.”<sup>23</sup> That understanding of a frame is closely related to the discourse-analytic concept of a macroproposition of a text, that is the fundamental sense expressed by the text, transcending any explicitly stated propositions and requiring readers’ knowledge of given cultural context.<sup>24</sup> Of the possible approaches to frame analysis, the less formal method of close reading without pre-constructed models or quantitative analysis was chosen, due to the exploratory nature of research questions posed and length constraints. Koring and Matthes defined labeled this approach “hermeneutical”.<sup>25</sup> The typical text characteristics distinguished by critical discourse analysis, such as keywords, modality or rhetorical techniques, will also be pointed out and treated as building blocks of frames.<sup>26</sup>

The common denominator for the research questions outlined is that of self-perceptions. The cultural dimension of U.S. Japanese relationship or public perceptions of president’s gestures are in fact providing us with an insight to American self-image and its structure. Episodes of controversy can serve as Chilton’s “critical moments of discourse”,<sup>27</sup> revealing the media portrayal’s cultural determinants.

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<sup>21</sup> Norman H. Nie et. al., “The world wide web and the U.S. political news market,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54, no. 2 (2010): 428–439.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert M. Entman „Framing: Toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Luther, Marc M. Miller, “Framing of the 2003 U.S. – Iraq war demonstrations,” *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, 85, no. 1 (2005): 79.

<sup>24</sup> Teun van Dijk, “The interdisciplinary study of news as discourse,” in *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research*, ed. K.B. Jensen, N.W. Jankowski (London: Routledge, 1991): 112–113.

<sup>25</sup> Kohring, Jorg Matthes, “The content analysis of media frames: toward improving reliability and validity,” *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 2 (2008): 258–279.

<sup>26</sup> Gerlinde Mautner, “Analyzing Newspapers, Magazines and Other Print Media,” in *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. M. Krzyzanowski, R. Wodak (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, “Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 1 (1989): 1–37.

## Results and Discussion

The event could be read and understood in a number of ways, since its circumstances encompassed different layers of context. The place of the event, a palace of the Japanese Imperial couple, potentially situated it in the context of the U.S.-Japanese relations, which are founded on a rather remarkable transition from sworn enemies during the WWII to long lasting allies after that. The occasion, Obama's first East Asian visit, evoked the expectations developed at the front of the national foreign policy. Finally, the type of the event, which could be described as a diplomatic mishap or a gaffe, places it in a very specific realm of diplomatic language and symbolism. Here especially, one can easily see how different systems of meaning or etiquette were overlapping: we have the U.S. diplomatic protocol, Japanese custom of bowing (as understood by Obama), the specific protocol applicable exclusively to the imperial couple (which some say is obscure even to average Japanese themselves) and finally the perspective of the American audiences with their Western understanding of the gesture. All this combined created the "murky waters" of diplomatic protocol, as one of the commentators put it, and murky waters are perfect for political debates since no clear answers are available.

First observation that can be drawn after examining texts dealing with the controversy is that traditional press and blogs focused on different aspects of those outlined above. Newspapers rarely focused exclusively on the event, more often using it to make larger points when reviewing the whole trip or its reception. Obama's bow was a symbol of either good willed cultural sensitivity<sup>28</sup> or his underwhelming performance during the excursion.<sup>29</sup> The blogs, in accordance with their flexibility and capacity for immediate communication, grappled with the event more directly. It is interesting to observe how political blogs and websites become important actors of the media landscape,<sup>30</sup> reaching out to wide range sources (Politico), and more importantly, providing the momentum for the issue. By the time newspapers published their take on the matter, most of the rhetorical salvos on both sides had been fired, and summarizing the controversy was often the only thing left to do.

What newspapers and blogs shared was the strategies to determine their stance onwards Obama's gesture. The most popular way was trying to recall historical examples of similar controversies. Obama's supporters often mentioned bows given to Emperor Hirohito by President Nixon and George Bush's bow at Hirohito's funeral. There was also 1994 Bill Clinton's bow to Akihito, then gently criticized by the New York Times, which was now cited as proof of media uncritical support for Obama. Critics were pointing out to Obama's bow to Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah earlier that

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<sup>28</sup> "Obama goes to China, brings home a T-shirt," *USA Today*, 20 Nov 2009: A. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Peggy Noonan, "Declarations: He can't take another bow," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 Nov 2009: A. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Nie et.al. "The world wide web and the U.S. political news market"..., 428.

year as further proof of President's lasting problem with meeting aristocrats.<sup>31</sup> Linking to a YouTube compilation of foreign leaders meeting the Emperor with a simple handshake was also popular.<sup>32</sup> Reaching out to experts was, perhaps surprisingly, less frequent. Newsweek included two counterbalancing opinions of former State Department experts on diplomatic protocol and NewsBusters blog quoted an anonymous expert after another blog. No definitive answer as to whether bowing is allowed or proper under the protocol was presented, experts did, however, agree that combining a bow and a handshake was wrong. More often, the authors quoted either presidential staffers or opposition politicians (Dick Cheney, Karl Rove). Even a 1994 *New York Times* article, asserting that bowing is traditionally implicitly banned from the protocol, was quoted to prove the inappropriateness of the situation. That no Japanese sources were employed is not that surprising, having in mind the Western media long established ethnocentrism – foreign cultures are still most often explored and explained by Western “experts” on them rather than a direct communication with their representative.<sup>33</sup>

Close reading texts in order to define the frames employed most often to communicate the event brought two main conclusions. First was the unexpected lack of importance of the U.S. – Japanese relations context. Of all the texts only 6 explicitly related to the history of mutual relations. The most popular reference was reminding that Akihito's father approved the attack on Pearl Harbor. Only two texts tried to elaborate and make a larger point about the mutual relations. *LA Times* blog Andrew Malcolm wrote a short synopsis of the relationship,<sup>34</sup> which informed readers about the main historical events of thereof. It seemed rather hastily put together, with the only relevant point being the comparison of Obama's bow to the iconic picture portraying general MacArthur standing next to Emperor Hirohito.<sup>35</sup> Conservative *Powerline* used the same juxtaposition being much less subtle about its meaning: “When MacArthur stood beside the Emperor, he subordinated himself to his country. MacArthur not only believed in the proposition that all men are created equal, he sought to teach it to others. Japan was a case in point.”<sup>36</sup>

This reaction is a clear sign of power-balance perception forming the foundational narrative of the U.S.-Japanese relationship. The U.S. is the “teacher” of democratic values, and Obama's gesture was a clear denial of that mission. It also interesting to note that of all texts relating to the history of mutual relations, all referred to the WWII and none to the period of tensions during the 80s mentioned before, or any post-war moment for that matter. This indicates the strength of memories of war in American

<sup>31</sup> Scott Johnson, “Why is this man bowing?” *Powerline*, <http://www.powerline.com/archives/2009/11/024948.php> (accessed February 10, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm, “Obama's wow bow II: Turns out Japan's emperor is just fine with simple handshakes”...

<sup>33</sup> Luther, *Press Images, National Identity and Foreign Policy: A Case Study of U.S.-Japan Relation from 1955–1995* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm, “How low will he go? Obama gives Japan's Emperor Akihito a wow bow”...

<sup>35</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Macarthur\\_hirohito.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Macarthur_hirohito.jpg) (accessed February 10, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, “Why is this man bowing?”...



collective memory: if the historical context is ever evoked it dates back directly to the events of the war, still defining the basic understanding of Japan as a former enemy. That definition overshadows 65 years of the successful alliance. Naturally, what is most important is that the majority of texts didn't mention the historical context at all. This strongly indicates that Japan, while remaining a vital ally for policymakers and experts, has almost disappeared from the public "radar" when it comes to regional politics. In the lengthier analysis of Obama's visit, the issues dealt with during his stopover in Tokyo were usually given only secondary importance.

But even if the U.S.-Japanese conflict frame was not employed as often as it probably would have been two decades earlier, the most popular frame used was based on similar premises, only on a more universal level. Comments of Obama's bow situated the event squarely in the context of the U.S. position abroad. For the critics the bow was unnecessary and detrimental to U.S. image and interests. Even media supportive of Obama rarely treated the gesture as something to be proud of, instead diminishing its importance or seeing it as a good-willed blunder. In all, of the 34 pieces read more than half have been critical of Obama's gesture and/or his handling of the visits.

The most common criticism was informed by the classical American republicanism – American leaders or citizens should not grovel before royalty ("groveling" was a keyword appearing often). That Jeffersonian reverence for individual freedom has not been historically unchallenged, competing with the proponents of a strong state since the days of Hamiltonian federalists. Indeed, rhetorical positioning of Obama as the representative of individual freedoms and equality may seem somewhat peculiar, given the relative amount of authority of his position, if not the U.S. global hegemony. Yet that tension is easily neutralized when subsumed by the overreaching frame of American exceptionalism.<sup>37</sup>

This potent metanarrative has been present in American imagination since the puritan idea of the "city on the hill." The opposition between the state and individual is resolved by integrating two "master frames"<sup>38</sup> of liberal individualism and ethnic nationalism. While the first stresses the ontological status of rational and free individual, the second ascribes that agency to the nation, seen as a primordial group-entity. Americans are free and self-reliant individuals, and their state is founded on the ideals of allowing them to maintain being that. That intertwining of those two themes is common for many modern democracies, but the American version has additional element of a strong sense of self-assured uniqueness and self-proclaimed mission to spread those ideals. Both critics and supporters of Obama's gesture embrace similar fundamental assumptions. Whether decrying Obama's behavior as embarrassing and deferential or simply portraying it as one of the indications of the trip's failures, they

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example: David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Godfrey Hodson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Thomas König, "Frames: Theoretical Preliminaries," *Economic and Social Research Council Research Methods Programme*, <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications> (accessed February 1, 2011).

view the trip as a set of world-problems to be tackled by the president – that capacity and responsibility is viewed as something natural.

Obama's bow could easily be interpreted as a powerful disruption to that metanarrative, viewed as his deference and subservience to external authority – authority based on tradition, blood, and established hierarchy. These are discursively opposite to American ideals, and are actually used as features of "Others" Americans define themselves against. European monarchies of the "Old World", Soviet totalitarianism, Japanese hierarchical "groupism" and now Chinese authoritarianism were clear opposites of ideals of freedom and equality, as well as were challenging American superiority.<sup>39</sup> The construction of Other is necessary for self-definition. This is clearly present in the following quote from the typical criticism wielded at Obama:

Obama's breach of protocol is of a piece with the substance of his foreign policy. He means to teach Americans to bow before monarchs and tyrants. He embodies the ideological multiculturalism that sets the United States on the same plane as other regimes based on tribal privilege and royal bloodlines. He gives expressive form to the idea that the United States now willingly prostrates itself before the rest of the world. He declares that the United States is a country like any other, only worse, because we have so much for which to apologize.<sup>40</sup>

To conclude, it is worth stressing the political potential of symbolic events like this, especially when summarized with a quickly spreading image. In hindsight, it is easy to see its iconic potential, as it came dangerously close to the status held, for example, by the photo of President Ford tumbling from the stairs of the presidential jet. Controversies like this demonstrate the limits to expectations of foreign policy change associated with Obama. Promises of more conciliatory and image-friendly approach easily scored points with voters tired of former president policy. But the idea of America's need for leadership and prominence is deeply ingrained, and upsetting it, even unwillingly, can be politically dangerous.

## APPENDIX

### Sources analyzed:<sup>41</sup>

#### Newspapers

"Blow-up over bow," *Newsday*, 17 Nov 2009: A. 58.

"Leaving more questions than he takes," *The Washington Post*, 19 Nov 2009: A. 2.

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<sup>39</sup> Chengxin Pan, "The 'China Threat' in American self-imagination: the discursive construction of other as power politics," *Alternatives: global, local, political* 29, no. 3 (June 2004): 313.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, "Why is this man bowing?"...

<sup>41</sup> All sources last accessed February 10, 2010.

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